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# **Highland Games as Serious Leisure: Becoming a Masters Athlete**

James Bowness

LEADS, University of Glasgow, Scotland

## **Abstract**

In a context of successful ageing discourse, a growing number of older adults are turning to competitive sport. The phenomenon known as Masters sport is a form of serious leisure that challenges stereotypes of ageing. Contemporary research has explored how individuals become Masters athletes in a variety of sports, focusing upon on the mainstream sports of running, swimming and tennis. Research has yet to explore how people become involved in activities that have less universal appeal. This article begins filling this gap by examining how Masters athletes became involved in the Highland Games, a sport contextualised by its links to Scotland and its diaspora. A pragmatic theoretical approach lending from three existing models is used to make sense of how people enter the Games. Drawing on semi-structured life history interviews with 19 Masters athletes, this case study details two pathways to the Highland Games. The article describes how, unlike previous research, most athletes enter the sport later in life and are either drawn to competition through an emergent identification with Scotland or a diversification of bodily dispositions that existed before Games participation. The article concludes that theoretical flexibility is required to understand better the socio-cultural factors that influence Masters sport participation.

**Keywords:** Masters; serious leisure; sport; Highland Games, Scotland

## **Introduction**

In Western societies, two-thirds of citizens can expect to live over 65 years of age (Stuart-Hamilton, 2011), up from one-quarter of those born at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Brody, 1988). At a time when the ageing of populations has been deemed problematic (Phillipson, 2013), physical activity has been conceived as a preventative health practice

(WHO, 2018). Despite the increasing awareness of the benefits of physical activity, levels of inactivity continue to increase with age (Sport England, 2018). The latest Active Lives Survey suggests that 71.7% of 16-34-year-olds meet the advocated 150 minutes of physical activity per week, while 65.4% of 45-54-year-olds and only 35.3% of over 75's meet the same target (Sport England, 2018). Participation in sport also declines with age (Klostermann & Nagel, 2014). The latest Active Lives Survey found that 44.4% of 16-34-year olds had participated in sporting activities at least twice in the last 28 days (Sport England, 2018). In contrast, 34.4% of 45-54-year-olds, 27.2% of 55-64-year-olds and 17.8% of over 75-year olds fulfil the same criteria. Nevertheless, the last two decades have witnessed an increase in the number of older people participating in Masters sport (Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi, & Horton, 2010; Dionigi, 2008). Masters athletes are adults that compete in age categorised competitive sport, often starting at the age of 35 and progressing well into later life (IMGA, 2019).

Scholarship on the experiences of Masters athletes' is growing, often focusing on how athletes reconcile their advancing age with a social practice associated with youth (Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Tulle, 2008). Athletes have been termed 'successful agers' (Geard, Rebar, Raeburn, & Dionigi, 2018) for their relatively high levels of physical, psychological and social functionality. Successful ageing, also known as 'active aging, healthy aging, positive aging, productive aging, and competent aging' (Foster and Walker, 2014, p84), is defined by criteria such as a 'low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity and active engagement with life' (Ostwald and Dyer, 2011, p48). In being 'successful agers', these athletes overcome negative stereotypes of older bodies and mobilise alternate readings of the ageing process (Dionigi, 2008; Horton, 2010; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Pike, 2011; Tulle, 2008). Resisting ageist stereotypes requires maintaining the functionality of the ageing body, allowing for continued participation in sport. Starting and

maintaining a Masters career is, therefore, a difficult task, one that requires sustained effort. This commitment has led many to conceptualise Masters sport as a form of ‘serious leisure’ (Dionigi, 2002; Hueser, 2005; Phoenix & Smith, 2011; Siegenthaler & O’Dell, 2003).

This paper argues that Masters participation in the Highland Games is also a form of serious leisure. Presenting a case study of the Masters Highland Games, a sport synonymous with Scotland and its diaspora, the article details two factors that lead to the creation of sustained participation in Masters sport. The serious leisure perspective and current models that look at sport and physical activity in later life contextualise these two factors.

### **Serious Leisure and Models of Becoming**

The ‘serious leisure perspective’ of Robert Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2001, 2007, 2014) has been used to conceptualise a variety of leisure activities. Serious leisure is framed as distinct from both casual and project-based leisure (Stebbins, 2007), and is defined as the ‘systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer activity sufficiently substantial and interesting for the participant to find a career there’ (Stebbins, 1992, p3). The use of the word ‘serious’ ‘embodies such qualities as earnestness, sincerity, importance and carefulness’ (Stebbins, 2014, p5); all of which can be applied to the devoted nature of participation in Masters sport. One important quality of serious leisure is the extent to which its participants identify with their chosen activity. This quality relates to a level of involvement in the practice, ranging from the dabbler (casual leisure) to the devotee (serious leisure). Elkington and Stebbins (2014) argue that casual leisure is ‘too fleeting, mundane and commonplace to become the basis for a distinctive identity’ (p19), whereas serious leisure requires a level of involvement that results in self-identification.

Jones (2006) argues that identification with leisure practices should be the primary focus of the serious leisure perspective. This focus on identity is well suited to Masters athletes who

engage deeply enough to develop ‘reputations and identities’ relating to their sport (Stevenson, 1990, 2002). As such, engagement in serious leisure may impact upon self and social identities. The intersubjective nature of this experience is demonstrated by the Masters runners of Tulle (2008), who states that ‘the claim to an athletic identity was made by all the informants without equivocation’ (p156). Heuser’s (2005) bowlers, who continued to identify as bowlers post-retirement, demonstrate the longevity of these identities. Those identifying as Masters athletes may manage the ageing body and negotiate family and work obligations as a ‘systemic pursuit’ (Stebbins, 1992, p3) to continue their sport (Dionigi, Fraser-Thomas, & Logan, 2012; Palmer, Tulle, & Bowness, 2017).

Aside from the serious leisure perspective, various authors have examined the social trajectories and careers of Masters athletes (Dionigi, 2006; Heuser, 2005; Stevenson, 2002; Tulle, 2008; Wheaton, 2017). These accounts have identified the ‘career contingencies’ (Becker, 1952; Stevenson, 2014) that challenge or support engagement with Masters sport. Here, as in Stebbins’ (1992) use of the term, ‘career’ is used in a context distinct from its occupation connotations. Instead, careers are understood as subjective, capturing the meaningful movements that occur within an area of life that individuals place importance (Palmer et al., 2017; Stevinson, 2002). Ronkainen, Tikkanen and Nesti (2018) define subjective careers as ‘what it means for them [athletes] to inhabit the sporting life-world and how the sport practices connect with their broader sense of life meaning’ (p294).

In conceptualising how people become Masters athletes, Dionigi (2015) models trajectories to Masters sport along three pathways. These include those who have ‘continued’ in sport; those who ‘rekindle’ a previous engagement with sport; and those labelled as ‘late bloomers’, who first enter sport as Masters (Dionigi, 2015). These three routes are entangled in a variety of social dynamics. For example, women are often destined to become ‘rekindlers’ due to the impact of reproduction and motherhood on sporting participation; a pattern supported

elsewhere (Tulle, 2008). The concept of ‘rekindler’ is akin to the first and second chance at a sporting career developed by Ronkainen, Ryba, Tonge and Tikannen (2019); whereby the ‘second chance’ provides another opportunity to reach a potential level of sporting performance that had not been achieved during earlier participation. Dionigi’s (2015) ‘late bloomers’ enter sport following difficult circumstances such as the loss of a spouse; a phenomenon explored elsewhere (Kleiber, Hutchinson, & Williams, 2002). Late bloomers may often be female due to their higher chance of becoming widowed; a result of increased life expectancy and a higher chance of partnering an older spouse (ONS, 2014). Other ‘late bloomers’ may use sport as preventative medicine or as a response to existing medical conditions (Tulle & Dorrer, 2012).

Dionigi’s (2015) model is a useful heuristic tool, yet it is limited in a few areas. The typology is made up of individuals who ‘continued’ or ‘rekindled’ careers in sports such as tennis, running, cycling or swimming. Absent in these ‘continuer’ and ‘rekindler’ examples are cases of people who change sport as Masters athletes or return to sport by participating in a discipline with which they had no previous engagement. Although Dionigi (2015) acknowledges the impact of a variety of factors (age, class, gender, personal biography) on Masters careers, her model prioritises sporting history. A focus on sport works well for those who continue or return to the same sport that was played earlier but is insufficient in explaining more complex cases. The examples used therefore position sporting careers as somewhat uniform, with Masters sport predicated on previous engagement with specific sports. I argue this overlooks complex lifelong interactions with other physical practices. For example, it is unclear if the lifelong gym-goer, who decides to start Masters swimming, is classed as either a ‘continuer’ or a ‘late bloomer’. The search for shared patterns across a group of Masters athletes means that, to some extent, the subjectivities of individual lives are undermined through the primacy given to specific sporting history. Beyond the importance of

other physical practices, the focus on personal sporting history downplays the relevance of subjective meanings that exist outside of physical practices.

In addressing some of these concerns, Palmer et al. (2017) extend Dionigi's (2015) typology to examine the specific meanings attributed to physical activity in later life. In this model, later life engagement with physical activity is nestled between functional, sporting or performative meanings. Functional physical activity refers to practices that are instrumental in the everyday lives of individuals, such as household labour, family activities, or walking to meet friends (Palmer et al., 2017). Sporting physical activity is explained using Bourdieu's (1977) 'logic of practice', a process of identifying with the sub-cultural logics of individual sports. Performative physical activity refers to the uses of the body that come to symbolise an individual's identity, which may incorporate, for example, aesthetic practices such as dance. This meaning structure connects physical practices to more general meanings that may relate to age, gender, ethnicity, national identity and other social categorisations. Physical practices can fall neatly into a single meaningful category or straddle multiple. An active commute may be quite easy to define, but an example such as weightlifting may have functional, performative and sporting meanings. While not aimed directly at competitive Masters sport, this typology, in combination with Dionigi (2015), provides a theoretical framework to understand how people become Masters athletes.

Conceptualising the Highland Games as a form of serious leisure and combining the models of Dionigi (2015) and Palmer (2017), is useful for a variety of reasons. Firstly, considering the Games as a form of serious leisure provides a basis to understand the importance within the lives of its participants. The serious leisure approach also allows a plurality in how athletes engage with their activity 'seriously'. Serious engagement may exist through participation, volunteering, occupational links, coaching or judging. Secondly, the focus on past sporting engagement present within Dionigi's (2015) model allows us to consider how

personal sporting history impacts present participation. A focus on prior engagement is useful to explain those cases of people who have previous experiences of sport that directly relate to Masters participation. Thirdly, the use of Palmer et al. (2017) can fill in the gaps of Dionigi's model, namely the importance of physical practices that exist outside of sport and the meaning of structures that are not directly sporting. Fourthly, I argue that a combination of these three models leads to a pragmatic approach which provides a holistic tool to analyse these subjective careers. Using three models to examine pathways to Masters sport also undermines the limitations of each model. This approach will be utilised to explore entry into the Masters Highland Games.

## **Highland Games**

The Highland Games are community festivals that typically contain pipe banding, Highland dancing, track and field, and heavy athletics. Heavy athletics is the centrepiece of the Games and comprises of events that require the throwing of heavy objects as far, or as high, as possible. The most famous event is the caber toss, which involves the flipping of a wooden pole that extends up to 20ft in length and 120lbs in weight (McLennan & McLennan, 1990). Men dominate the sport, but the numbers of women and older athletes participating are growing (Bowness & Zipp, 2020). From 2001, athletes over 40 years of age could compete in an annual Masters World Championship Highland Games. These events have taken place in Scotland, Iceland, Germany, Canada, and the USA, with most taking place in the US (Scottish Masters, 2019). Irrespective of the host location, most participants at these events are from North America.

The Highland Games are synonymous with Scotland, with most Games created in Scotland during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Jarvie, 1991). Following the emigration of Scots, the Games have become an increasingly global phenomenon. A large portion of this migration



was to North America, where, in the 1920s, 363,000 Scots moved across the Atlantic (Devine, 2011). Earlier immigrants set up Caledonian or St Andrews societies as a way of maintaining Scottish identity and culture (Sullivan, 2014). Between 1850 and 1914, 1200 of these societies were created (Ray, 2005). These societies produced a Highland Games scene in North America, one which consistently hosts approximately three times as many Games per annum as Scotland (Ray, 2005). The Highland Games are, due to its historical context, associated with heritage tourism; a practice where participants and spectators can learn about and celebrate their personal histories (Brewster, Connell & Page, 2009; Chhabra, Healy & Sills, 2003). The Highland Games are therefore a site of leisure activity that brings to the forefront personal histories and national identities in the context of a competitive Masters sport. I argue that the Masters Highland Games phenomenon is a novel form of leisure that has yet to receive scholarly attention.

## **Methodology**

### ***Recruitment and Strategy***

Data were collected at the 2014 Masters Highland Games World Championships in Inverness, Scotland. The event was a Masters only event that was separate from mainstream Highland Games events in Scotland. The event was convenient for a Glasgow based researcher, living in a country with a limited Masters scene. An initial post on the Masters World Championship 2014 Facebook group led to initial meetings which, through snowball sampling, produced a sample of 19 participants. Data collection took place in two waves, the first of which involved in-person interviews with thirteen athletes at the championship event in Inverness. The second wave involved e-mail interviews with six new athletes and follow up discussion with four athletes that had been interviewed in Inverness. Life history interviews were used to gather biographical data, including the role of sport and physical

activity across the athletes' lives. This approach gave the participants a chance to detail how they became Highland Games athletes, as well as their life experiences of physical activity and sport. It also allowed participants to describe the social contexts of how their participation began. Sport scholars have adopted life history interviews to reveal the most important events and experiences of athletic biographies (Phoenix, Smith, & Sparkes, 2010; Tulle, 2008, 2017).

### ***Participants***

Interviews with thirteen men and six women produced a male-dominated sample that is representative of the Masters community within the Games (Scottish Masters, 2019).

Participants came from the US (16), Canada (1), England (1) and Germany (1). I did not aim to have a sample of predominantly North American athletes, but athletes from these nations make up the vast majority of participants. Furthermore, Highland Games events in North America have devoted Masters competitions that separate competition based on age. These are rare within Scotland, where open age competition is the norm. Scottish Games quite often have no female competitors, meaning that very few become Master athletes. Consequently, there were no Scottish women at the World Championships in Inverness. Despite a well-developed Highland Games scene in Scotland, only 16 Scottish men were amongst the 169 registered athletes at the Masters World Championships. An interview with one of these athletes was organised but failed to materialise after a no-show.

The age of participants ranged from 40 to 78, with a mean of 55. Most study participants were in their 40's. I interviewed five athletes in their 50's and three in their 70's. In terms of social class, most athletes were college-educated, in stable employment, and could afford to travel across the Atlantic for leisure that, in many cases, doubled up as a family vacation. No

formal measures of social class were measured, and in terms of ethnicity, all athletes were either white North Americans or Europeans.

### ***Data Analysis***

Twelve hours of audio data and 226 emails were analysed using thematic analysis in the style of Braun and Clarke (2006), a method that has been used significantly within qualitative sports research (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). Interview transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarisation. Initial coding identified data that related to how individuals became involved in the sport. Following coding, the creation of themes aimed to capture the factors and influences that led individuals towards participation in Masters sport. Two themes elicited from the data were the importance of Scottish identity and the relevance of pre-existing physical capacities. The researcher reviewed these themes before being externally verified by three PhD supervisors who acted as peer corroborators. The following sections detail two themes that explain how people became involved in the Masters Highland Games.

## **Results**

### ***Being ‘Scottish’***

Many athletes first found the Games at local Celtic festivals. These festivals include cultural activities such as dancing, bagpiping, Highland Games and clan tents (Leith & Sim, 2016). In general, these festivals celebrate Scottish or Celtic culture, aim to reproduce the customs and values of a mythical Scotland (Bairner & Whigham, 2014; Chhabra et al., 2003), and provide education to those of Scottish descent. They are generally inclusive of those without Scottish heritage, and diverse local communities attend. Heather (52), a ‘continuer’, was one athlete who found the Games at a Celtic festival. Here she details how her Highland Games career began at 33 years of age:

There was a Scottish festival near our hometown, and my husband had read about it or heard about it on the radio and said hey I want to go out there. We had the whole family; at that point, our daughter was two, and our son was five. So, we got them in the stroller and headed out there to the park, and we got there before it even started. He starts talking to a few of the athletes, and he comes back and says, 'I'm going to do this today'. Do what today? And of course, I've got both kids and juggling and I'm like what are you talking about, and he was like I want to do this, so he just jumped in and did the games that day and did very well. They're C class, beginners and so that was in March and we had just a great time that day everything was really resonating with us you would put it, we liked the music, we liked all of it, so there was a Games locally in Tulsa, that was Oklahoma City, so about 100 miles away, it was 2 months later that I tried my first games been just hooked ever since.

For Heather, the Celtic festival was a space where her husband got involved, which led to her participation. The importance of significant others in starting and maintaining a Masters career occurred in most cases, with family, friends, spouses and work colleagues all acting as recruiters to the Games. Aside from Celtic festivals athletes were recruited at work, through family or by friends, with each path of recruitment driven by those already in the Games. One exception to this trend was Monica (47), a 'rekindler' who had competed in track and field as a youngster. Here she describes how she found the Games:

When did I see my first Highland Games event? I was seeking an activity to take my youngest to and get off my sick bed and back out into life. And as I explored the websites, I discovered amateur women throwing and was inspired to consider the idea that I might try it if it was available to do so. I enquired and was invited to volunteer for two days at this festival that was running. And at the end of the weekend, I was shown a few things then informed of a Highland school that was coming up three weeks later. So, I signed up. I knew it would not be easy. The timing was very soon after a hysterectomy and hand surgery, but I was determined to improve whatever I needed to, to get better at the throwing. My deepest motive was I really wanted to reach my full-strength POTENTIAL (her emphasis). As all through my younger years when I competed at school in sport, I accelerated but then my parents would not pay for me to do the next level.

Monica's case is different from most others in that her introduction to the Games came through an act of individual seekership (Stevenson, 2002). Her seekership led her to participate in a festival. After volunteering, she attended a training event and begun competing. Her participation transitioned from casual to serious leisure following the discovery of a newfound ethnic identity. In our opening exchange, Monica introduced herself

as a '47 years old Female Highlander - Irish/ English descent with some Native [American]'.

She was born in Canada and a resident there. Here she explains how she found out about her heritage and its importance to her:

Knowing my heritage or ethnicity for me helps some things make sense. Like my drive to compete and my love for renaissance and history of it. Being primarily Irish (father's father) is a weird thing as my father denies it, as he was his mother's boy (she was English). So [it] **was not till I was throwing Highland and visited a clan tent that I learned my heritage** (my emphasis). And just knowing has given me a stability in my person. We need to know what we have come from so we can choose where we will go from here!

Learning about personal heritage adds a 'performative' (Palmer et al., 2017) element to Monica's participation, and its impact on her identity signifies the transition from 'dabbler to devotee' (Stebbins, 2014). Like Monica, most athletes were aware of some sort of relationship to either Scottish or Irish heritage, and there was often a conflation of Scottish and Irish ancestry through the term Celtic. For many, this was an essential aspect of participation, constituting a performance of national or cultural identity (Edensor, 2002). The wearing of Scottish kilts, styled in specific clan tartans, means that this form of physical activity gains a 'performative' element (Palmer et al., 2017). Choosing the right tartan required knowledge of personal heritage. This knowledge was either present before Games participation or was gained from clan tents at Celtic festivals.

Scottish and Celtic identity was also crucial for Edward (75), who found the Games in his early 40's after lifelong participation in traditional American sports. At this point there was no Masters scene in the Highland Games, so he would play in open age categories. For Edward, maintaining a Celtic cultural tradition was of utmost importance and participation in the Highland Games was an act of preservation. A significant achievement for Edward was setting up a St Andrews Society, which later developed into a broader Celtic Society. He also participated in a pipe band, and his daughters competed in Highland Dancing. Edward's participation can, therefore, be understood as 'performative' (Palmer et al., 2017) and part of

a broader serious leisure career that incorporated other Celtic activities. The impact of these wider practices affected Edward's social identity, a point he emphasises here:

Err just one of the things you know if you live anywhere near our part of the country. You know the St Andrews going to be having games and festivals and performances and being a bagpiper, I do a lot of weddings and funerals I do a lot of stuff like that. Trevor (son) tells everybody 'they might not know your name, but everybody will say that old son of a bitch with the white beard who plays the bagpipes'. They all know.

Edward's strong identification with Celtic culture means that his transition to the Games was always entangled with his identity. It had always had performative as well as sporting elements (Palmer et al., 2017). His lifelong engagement with sport, combined with his personal identity, meant that his Highland Games participation was nestled within a serious leisure career that covered amateur sport, volunteering and devotee work (Stebbins, 2014).

Few participants had been involved in the Highland Games outside of Masters competition. The only 'continuer' of the Highland Games was Brad, who found the Games at the age of 22. Despite having no Scottish heritage, Highland culture was important to his life. At the time of the interview, he was 45 years old and had recently moved from the United States to Scotland. In describing his move across the Atlantic, he details the importance of Highland culture:

I was a master film technician for 18 years. Film industry dried up, my partner said what do you want to be when you grow up. I said I want to do Highland Games full time. That's what I wanna do. I want to run organise and get things moving forward for the Highland Games if it be on a junior level, an open level, a Masters level. I want to do every aspect of it because I think it's important to maintain this cultural icon which came from the Highlands of Scotland it's a very, very small unique area in a small country on a big globe and why is it that all of a sudden we have this tiny little section of Scotland [that] has become very popular worldwide. Literally worldwide has maintained this idea of tossing weights, cabers, hammers and things like that, so my theory was it feeds a niche there is a niche for everything, this was feeding the niche for people like myself that needed something.

Brad's involvement in the sport moved beyond participation to become occupational. The 'devotee' nature of Brad's commitment extends beyond merely performing in the Games. For Brad, leisure came first, and work followed, with the two merging to problematise the duality of work and leisure (Beatty & Torbert, 2003). Indeed, as Stebbins (2009, p768) argues, 'occupational devotion' erases the line between leisure and work. Brad's involvement as a Master athlete cannot be extracted from his economic relationship to the Games. Nevertheless, his participation came before his commercial connection to the Games, and his occupational entanglement adds to the serious nature of his participation. Following Palmer et al. (2017), Brad's engagement with the sport straddles sporting, performative and functional meaning structures (Palmer et al. 2017). The logic of competition, national identification and economic necessity all frame Brad's participation.

For many with no connection to Scotland, the concept of heritage or identity was irrelevant. For these athletes, previous engagement in physical activities was more relevant to the process of becoming a Master Highland Games athlete.

### ***Inter-sporting transitions***

Most athletes who had no claim to Scottishness were 'rekindlers' (Dionigi, 2015) who had taken up the Games after returning from a different sport. All 'rekindlers' entered the Highland Games as Masters athletes only and had not competed in the Games before turning 40. Often the original sport required the same skills as the Games, such as the throwing events of track and field. Track and field athletics was one sport from which many athletes had transitioned.

Reasons for stopping competitive sport were nuanced by the vagaries of individual lives, with many respondents noting the familial obligations that had curtailed their participation in sport. As previous research has demonstrated, these life moments render sport secondary to

career or family (Dionigi, 2015, Tulle, 2008). In many cases, sporting participation resumed when children had gained a level of independence that allowed the parent to return to sport. A rare case involved Barry (47), who returned to sport after a divorce. Barry, like other US-based participants, had played traditional American sports at school and had continued his participation in college. Here, Barry briefly notes the obligations associated with the normative life course model:

I see it in many athletes, and I warn the younger people I train with, that it is going to happen. Once you graduate from college, roughly you are 21. You get a job, maybe get married, buy a house, start a family, and amateur sport falls off the 'Important Things To Do' list. It's not that you want to stop, just things get in the way. That was my reason to stop, I was just too busy, and my focus was on career and family.

Barry's participation was therefore contextualised by the removal of familial obligations, whereas many athletes entered the sport because of family connections or group visits to festivals. In Barry's case, he was recruited by a younger athlete within a specific context of his journey along the life course:

When I turned 40, a recently graduated thrower from my alma mater<sup>1</sup> contacted me and asked me why I stopped throwing and if I would be interested in throwing again. I was recently divorced, and without a whole lot of entertainment funds, so I took him up on his offer, and we started to train hammer throw together. I still had some affinity for the sport, and he and I attended a few collegiate meets together, where I would beat some first-year students, but not much else. Right around that time, several of the track and field athletes I competed with started talking about Highland Games. They said how they have many diverse events, that they are very fun, and they are usually free to compete; they may even be in the middle of a large festival.

Barry's transition back to sport came through the 'solicited recruitment' (Stevenson, 2002) of a younger athlete, but his track and field network supported his transformation to the Highland Games. His reference to participation as entertainment also suggests that the Games serves a functional, as well as sporting, purpose (Palmer et al. 2017). Barry's participation

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<sup>1</sup> Alma mater refers to the university or college that an individual attended.



could be understood as an example of casual leisure that became serious over time. Here he details how his physical capacities combine with a serious approach to the sport:

I'm blessed to be naturally strong and slightly athletic. I don't go to the gym frequently, and any time I do have to use for the sport, I use on training technique. Having only done it three years, that is where I get the biggest return on my time investment. And, honestly, it's a hobby, not a job. If I can't train, I just don't. Could I be better if I was more dedicated, sure, but for me, it's a great balance of being serious about the sport, and yet making sure it is fun.

Other 'continuers' had similar experiences with five entering the Highland Games as Masters athletes only. Games participation was often part of a multi-faceted sporting career, one that extended beyond the Games. One example comes from Patrick (46), who details his lifelong engagement with sport:

In America, we have junior high, then high school then college. In junior high I played the basic American sports, which were baseball, basketball and track and field things. Erm I didn't enjoy them as much when I got through high school when I got to leave for university, I started playing volleyball fell in love with that as a sport, so at the university level I played NCAA volleyball. Erm, I played that for four years and then ended up coaching for two years after that. And so ever since then, volleyball has been my main sport. But I golf a lot. I play softball like baseball, I bowl, and I'm a good competitive bowler. So, erm I am involved still in all of those sports, but volleyball is my main sport, and then I would say just below that, I'd say the Highland Games and then all the others I do for fun with my friends.

Patrick's sporting career had developed from school-age participation, through college sport and into both coaching and involvement as an adult. The Highland Games was not the only sport played at the time of the interview and was secondary to volleyball. Patrick and his wife had researched their family history but had failed to find a blood link to Scotland, later suggesting that personal heritage had no impact on any of his sporting endeavours. The lifelong engagement in a variety of sports meant that Patrick was a hobbyist (Stebbins, 2014). Here the Games makes up only one facet of participation in sport as a form of serious leisure, yet he distinguishes the Games from other sports which he claims he does for fun. A wider disposition towards physical practices aided Patrick's entrance to the Games.

Participants gave other reasons for transitioning between sports. As Barry details above, track and field appeared expensive and had a lack of competitive opportunity. Patrick mobilised his disposition for sport after being recruited by his partner's relatives. Others such as Charlotte (56) felt that her original sport, bodybuilding, was ill-fitting for Masters participation. Here she describes why she left powerlifting for the Games:

So if I wasn't having fun, I wouldn't be trying to do it at all. Does that answer the question – again powerlifting was not being as much fun. I enjoyed the ideas of getting better at things and all, but the pressure the way the meet is structured in powerlifting you're called to the platform then you have to wait for your command to do it. I'm also an official. I'm a judge in powerlifting, so it's a little more, it seems a little more intense than Highland Games. I always liken Highland Games and heavy athletics to being at a giant track meet. A giant track meet is what it is.

In this example, the transition to the Games is the result of the career closure of another sport (Prus & Irini, 1980). Powerlifting presented itself as at odds with what Charlotte wanted from her serious leisure. The desire for fun may have displaced the stronger sporting logics of powerlifting. Charlotte also felt as though the training required for Highland Games participation was more appropriate for the ageing body. Indeed, Charlotte believed the preparation for the Games helped her on-going injuries, meaning her involvement had gained a functional meaning (Palmer et al. 2017). Her training for the Highland Games was very similar to that of powerlifting, with strength work in the gym prioritised. This existing experience aided her transition to the Games.

## **Discussion**

The data presented above details two factors that contextualised how individuals entered the Masters Highland Games. National identity was an essential factor for many Masters athletes, making participation, for some, a performance of national identity (Edensor, 2002). Although data presented here was collected in Inverness, these performances of Scottish identity were mobilised in diasporic spaces far removed from the geographical areas of Scotland. Indeed,

Edensor (2002) argues that national identity has been ‘deterritorialised’ (p.29), stripped from its previous alignment to space by processes of migration and globalisation. With these identities ‘always becoming reconstituted in a process of becoming’ (p.29), participation in the Games, which often followed personal genealogical research, added an extra layer of meaning to participation. The example of Monica, who presented a hyphenated identity (Edensor, 2002), demonstrated how to some extent performing rituals of Scottishness through the Highland Games led to the prioritisation of Scottish heritage over other claims to identity. However, others, like Brad, had no Scottish heritage. His appreciation of Highland culture meant he had become occupationally entangled with the sport. Whereas others have cited the negotiation of work as a barrier to Masters sport (Partington, Partington, Fishwick, & Allin, 2005), Brad’s occupation troubled the boundary between leisure and work. The nature of Brad’s trade provided an ‘everyday’ link to performances of national identity (Edensor, 2002), a phenomenon that Billig (1995) refers to as ‘banal nationalism’.

As detailed in the second theme, not all participants mobilised a Scottish subjectivity and instead drew upon existing physical skills. The transition between sports was facilitated by an aligned ‘bodily hexis’ (Bourdieu, 1977), where the demands and uses of the body are similar across sports. Both track and field and the Highland Games require similar movement patterns and explosive strength. These similarities meant that existing skills were quickly transferred to the Games. Transition to the Games was either a continuation of existing sport participation or a rekindling of previous talent applied to a different sport. This case study demonstrates how some athletes get a ‘second chance’ (Ronkainen et al., 2019) at competitive sport by moving away from their first discipline. Although this inter-sporting transition does not fit easily into Dionigi’s (2015) ‘rekindler’ concept, it nevertheless demonstrates the value of considering previous engagement with competitive sports. Returning to sport in this nature is especially important given that in contrast to the work of

Dionigi, Horton and Baker (2013), most athletes in this study were not continuers in sport. As such, these Masters athletes either had to reproduce bodily dispositions from *earlier lives* or build new dispositions towards the Highland Games.

Both themes demonstrate the variety of ways in which people engage in the Games as a form of serious leisure. The accounts detailed above describe serious pursuits that take place on multiple levels. All participants engage with the Games as a form of amateur sport yet had spent significant sums of money to travel across the Atlantic to participate in a niche sport in Inverness. While it could be argued that this was a form of project-based leisure, attendance at the World Championships was one event within a season of events. Aside from the repetitive nature of competitive participation, serious engagement with the Games also took place via volunteering, officiating and, for Brad, via commercial involvement (Stebbins, 2014). As such, the participants detailed here demonstrate the enactment of serious leisure as amateurs, volunteers and hobbyists (Stebbins, 2014)

## **Conclusion**

This research has used a novel approach which locates Masters Highland Games participation as a form of serious leisure and uses a combination of Dionigi (2015) and Palmer et al. (2017) to make sense of the plurality of ways in which people become Masters athletes. The pragmatic use of these models allows for a more holistic understanding of what is a complex phenomenon. I argue that this eclectic approach addresses many of the limitations of each model.

This contribution adds to the work of Dionigi (2015) by expanding upon the socio-cultural forces that influence Masters participation. Looking beyond the impact of gender, age and class, the article notes how personal heritage and national identity can influence Masters engagement. It also demonstrates the applicability of a slightly revised version of the

continuer; rekindle; late bloomer model (Dionigi, 2015). The model of Palmer et al. (2017) is particularly useful in providing these tweaks, explaining transitions between sports by exploring how the meaning of physical practices can change. Considering changes in meaning is particularly useful in cases where broader social identities significantly impact upon the meanings of leisure activities and sporting participation.

Further research should continue to explore how individuals become Masters athletes in specific contexts. Other sports should be explored to understand the plurality of factors that contextualise the beginnings of a Masters sport career. The focus on a 'Scottish' sport here could extend to other sports with explicit national connotations, such as basketball, baseball, cricket, rugby, ice hockey or curling. This scholarship will allow us to understand the ever-growing phenomenon of the Masters athlete better, as well as further revealing the impact of socio-cultural factors on the Masters phenomenon. Such scholarship may also inform sport and physical activity policies that aim to improve the activity levels of those in later life.

Firstly, the novel theoretical approach of this study provides a framework with which to understand the vagaries that may facilitate or hinder sport participation in later life. Although based on a case study of white middle-class North Americans, the theoretical approach used here can be a helpful tool in understanding the sport, physical activity and leisure practices of other, less privileged populations. Secondly, this case study has explored a group of Masters athletes who participate for reasons which fall outside of successful ageing discourses. The experiences detailed here reveal a variety of processes that led older adults to enter Masters sport, none of which oriented around health or successful ageing discourses. Instead, these routes were built on either existing bodily capital or ethnic/national identities and demonstrate how broader social contexts may influence participation. Considering such forces may lead to more effective policies that aim to increase sporting engagement, which

may, in turn, stem the disengagement from sport in later life that currently exists (Sport England, 2018).

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The author reported no potential conflict of interest

## **Author Biography**

James Bowness is a sociologist of sport and physical activity. He completed his PhD at Glasgow Caledonian University in 2017. He currently works as an Effective Learning Adviser within the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Service at the University of Glasgow.

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